

FEATURE STORY

HOW CONSORTIA TELL THE NEWS: A SURVEY OF OVER 150 CONSORTIA AND SDOs

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Introduction: A consortium, like any other type of entity, has a need to spread information in order to achieve its goals. At one level, it needs to communicate with its members, but it is equally important that it inform a broader audience of its activities in order to achieve its objectives. The reasons for doing so include recruiting new members and informing non-members of the release of specifications. The latter is particularly important, since in order for a new standard to be successful, it is almost invariably necessary that it be implemented by a wider audience than the consortium members that helped create it.

There are many other, less direct reasons for a consortium to tell the news. Those reasons include achieving a position of trust in the commercial world in order to gain respect for its work product, and (when necessary) to seek to assert influence on the legislative process.

At the same time, almost all consortia are constrained by the limitations of small (or no) dedicated staff, and minimal budgets. Where, as is often the case, a given standard is intended for global adoption, the financial resources of a consortium are manifestly insufficient to carry on any meaningful degree of advertising. In consequence, a consortium must pursue every public relations opportunity its resources allow, as well as rely upon its members' own advertising, public relations and endorsement activities to leverage the limited efforts of the consortium itself.

The advent of the World Wide Web, the increasing pervasiveness of connectivity, and the availability of inexpensive electronic broadcasting of press releases have been a significant boon to consortia, as they have been for many other organizations and businesses with limited resources. Of course, rising above the increasing flood of released information is a challenge equal to the opportunity.

In order to determine how consortia seek to disseminate information, we decided to conduct a broad survey of how consortia make use of one or two of the most common methods of spreading the news: the familiar press release, and the design and content of websites. In so doing, we expected to also be able to take a snapshot of how consortia today are spending their time, and which of their efforts they think are most significant and important to promote.

Methodology: We visited all 159 consortia and official Standards Development Organizations (SDOs) which are profiled in the "Consortium and Standards List" section of ConsortiumInfo.org (www.consortiuminfo.org/ssl/links.php?cat=1) which maintain a website. This list includes virtually all major global standard setting organizations (both formal SDOs and consortia), as well as a sampling of regional and national bodies. It also includes organizations with all types of missions in support of standards, from strictly technical, to those which are both promotional and technical, to those which are purely promotional in nature. In short, we believe that the survey set is both diverse and comprehensive, and therefore can yield an accurate representation of the organizations which today create and/or promote technical standards and technologies.

In our first step in the survey, we recorded the date of the most recently posted press release at each site, in order to gauge the relative activity of standard setting organizations today. We also noted the number of consortia that do not appear to employ press releases at all as part of their efforts to achieve their objectives. Finally, we examined every press release issued in the past thirty days by the sampling, and categorized their content (see the following article, [What Are Consortia Doing Today? \(More Survey Results\)](#))

Findings A variety of information became clear from a survey involving a sampling of this size, whether measured over an extended period (as below) or over a shorter period of time (as in the following article). The raw data is as follows:

Quantitative Results:

· **Number of Releases per Organization:** During the survey period, the 156 organizations whose sites were live issued a total of 125 press releases, or an average of less than one (.80) per organization. However, when the number of releases is divided by the number of organizations (109) that have issued at least one press release since January 1, 2002, the number of releases per surveyed organization rises to 1.15, and when the relevant period is reduced to the past six months, it jumps once again - to 1.37 for the 91 organizations involved. The highest number of releases per organization was 10 (ANSI), while a number of organizations issued only 1.

Not surprisingly, the organizations that issued the largest number of press releases were those that have the highest number of simultaneously active technical processes - the SDOs and consortia active in core areas, such as **W3C** (www.w3c.org) and **OASIS Open** (www.oasis-open.org/news/oasis_news_01_07_03.php). Note that we believe that at least some organizations are likely to have issued press releases which were not made available at their websites, and accordingly a margin of error in this data and the data which follows must be assumed.

· **Frequency of Releases:** Although the results in this respect were not tabulated, it was clear that most organizations either made the issuance of press releases part of their ordinary course of operation or they did not. Widely separated, isolated press releases were comparatively rare.

· **Degree of Activity:** A healthy number of organizations (35, or 22% of the live sites) had issued at least one press release in the first 21 days of March. A further 33, for a combined total of 68 organizations (or 44% of the sampling), had issued at least one press release thus far in 2003. A total of 86 organizations (or 56%) had issued at least one press release within 6 calendar months of our survey. Interestingly, a total of 28 organizations (or 18%) either had never issued a press release at all, had removed any prior releases due to their becoming stale, or had succeeded in guarding their press releases from discovery by someone making a determined assault on their site.

18 organizations (or 12% of the sampling) had issued their last press release in the first eight months of 2002, presumably indicating that these organizations are on the decline or have changed their PR strategy. The balance of the sites hosted a last issued press release dated in 2001 (6 sites), 2000 (6 sites again), 1999 (2) or 1998 (2). Some of these sites, however, indicated ongoing activity.

· **Qualitative Data:** Several interesting observations on how consortia manage their news and present it to the public can be made from the surveyed data.

• **Attitude Towards News** Consortia take different approaches with respect to news, some of which seem to relate to their goals, and some of which relate to their apparent view of the role of a website. For example, some news-rich sites appeared to be directed almost entirely at their members, with the website serving simply as a convenient publishing platform (one site even limited all news to a password protected portion of the site). These sites had few, if any, available press releases, even though it seemed likely that the organizations in question would have issued them from time to time, and could have made them publicly available at their site had they chosen to do so. The organizations hosting these sites therefore either did not use press releases in support of their efforts, or failed to make them available through their website. The apparent reasons vary:

We Have a Secret Plan but We Can't Tell You What it is Some organizations were surprisingly bereft of news. For example, the **ECMA** (European Computer Manufacturers Association) site has a prominent "News" button occupying a significant portion of its home page real estate, but clicking on it will only reveal the documents approved at the 84th General Assembly of that august organization. There is no other news to be found at the site. Similarly, the **BlueTooth** organization (www.bluetooth.org), which presumably has issued many press releases, has an extensive site section for the press and analysts, as well as links to recent articles written about it and its members, but no way to access any of its own releases.

That's Not How We Do it Here: Some organizations which are strongly technical may release a great deal of information which is of interest to a broader audience, but seem to expect anyone interested to visit their site to find it. Most obviously, this includes several of the prominent organizations which are responsible for continuing the evolution of the Internet and the World Wide Web. For example, the **W3C** (World Wide Web Consortium - www.w3c.org) releases a great deal of information at its website which other, less active and/or influential consortia would happily feature in a press release. Still, it packages news in formal releases only 1 to 3 times a month. Of course, the W3C can depend on the technical, and even the popular, press visiting its site for news without having to be led there. The **IETF** (the Internet Engineering Task Force - www.ietf.org) takes things to the limit: its austere (but informative) site presents an impregnable wall between a reporter and any way to learn more about what the organization is currently up to.

We're All About Our Members: All consortia are ultimately about promoting the interests of their members, but some consortia go farther than others to promote individual members directly. As already noted, many consortia provide links to member press releases. But some, like the EBU (European Broadcasting Union - www.ebu.ch), go even farther, and provide links to only member news at the organization's website.

The Seven Ages of Man: Organizations, like people, go through stages of growth, maturity and decline. At least seven sites we visited relate to organizations which we know to have been disbanded, in some cases several years ago. In some cases, the remaining site serves a useful purpose, and provides access to completed standards. In others, only a mournful home page remains as a sort of hyperlinked tombstone. Still, a number of the organizations which had not issued a press release in some time represent active organizations. For example, the **MIDI Manufacturers Association** (www.midi.org) celebrated its 20th anniversary in January of this year, and currently has four active working groups. There are no press releases, or indeed any current news, in the public portions of the site.

Effectiveness of Site Design: While collecting our information, we could not fail but form some less empirical impressions regarding the visual and organizational ways that consortia and SDOs employ in presenting themselves to the world via the 'Web. To our surprise, we found that many consortia made it extremely difficult for a site visitor to learn what a given organization might be up to. Here are some of those impressions:

Bad Design Features In the most extreme example, three sites of entities which we know to be active were down for at least two consecutive days, precluding our gathering data from those sources at all. Also, while many consortia made it easy to find news, we were surprised at the poor design of the sites of many other organizations, which made it difficult or impossible to learn what the most recent accomplishments of the hosts might be. Examples of bad design included the absence of a clear tool bar (or even a drop down or side bar menu) category such as "Press Room", "What's New", or "Media Center". Many of the same sites which had a "search" function were found to host press releases which could only be found by that mechanism. Still others not only lacked a category, but also failed to supply either a site map or a search function at all, thus effectively locking whatever news they might have away from any curious eyes.

Good Design Features Of those sites that made an effort to make news easy to find, most employed a multiple column home page design, allocating one column to news. Most that did so, however, did not make an effort to distinguish between press releases, news of interest primarily to members, and (often) news relating to individual member companies which had adopted a standard or otherwise taken an action which supported overall consortium objectives. The balance of the well designed sites retain the somewhat less trendy format which requires a click through to a press or news center. Those that followed this format often divided news into the categories of press releases, member news, news from members, and (sometimes) general industry news. An interesting question is whether a categorized approach -- which allows for easy research, or an aggregated approach -- which emphasizes momentum behind consortium goals, represents the most effective practice.

Quality of Reported News: In the following article we analyze the content of the press releases viewed. Not surprisingly, standard setting and promotional consortia are no less likely to issue press releases relating to "non-news" than any other type of entity. Sadly, a great number of the press releases

reviewed related to announcing the names of new directors, the signing of new members, recording participation in trade shows, and other types of information which (in fact) would be better limited to posting at the organization's website for the information of members. Thus, despite the limited resources of consortia and SDOs, there was a surprising amount of "going through the motions" in the issuance of press releases, notwithstanding the low likelihood of the issued news ever finding a wider audience.

The lack of information and news at sites generally was surprising. The types of facts that a reporter or analyst might seek for background were often difficult to find (or absent entirely). In short, many sites displayed an absence of careful planning and thought regarding how best to make information available to the world. A sad commentary, given that the creation and hosting of website content is one of the most inexpensive promotional tasks that a consortium can undertake.

Summary and Conclusions: While a variety of ways of handling and disseminating news were observed, the practices of most organizations fell into a limited number of categories. Some of the decisions made by organizations in choosing one method or another seemed reasonably related to the goals of those organizations, while other techniques seemed more likely to be the result of limitations of resources, the individual preferences of those charged with site creation and public relations, or differences in the corporate culture of the members (e.g., business managers versus engineers or Open Source advocates).

In a surprising number of cases, it seems likely that issued press releases were not maintained in a visible location following the original electronic distribution of its text or linking information. In other cases, their location was so difficult to find that the result was functionally the same.

Whether in a given case this was the result of poor site design or faulty decision making regarding content, the result was to reduce, or eliminate, the long-term value of released information. This type of failure seems particularly unfortunate, since members of the press and analysts are likely to look to an organization's website as a resource for data, and as a means to form an accurate picture of an organization's goals, achievements and level of activity.

Overall, it appears that consortia would be well advised to be more critical of their means of disseminating information, and less prone to delegating all responsibility for these tasks to outsourced providers who may simply go through the standard cycles of promotion, regardless of their applicability to the task at hand.

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